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How ASIST “Learns”

Stewart Brand, author of the fascinating book, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They Are Built?*, as well as a pioneer in such remarkable achievements as the Whole Earth Catalog and The Well, delivered the keynote presentation at the ASIST Information Architecture Summit in March. Brand used examples from his book on physical buildings and human factors to suggest principles for architecture of websites. The following were among Brand's design principles:

- Every building (anything from the humblest abode to the tallest skyscraper) has six layers:
 - **Site** (geographic location; almost never changes)
 - **Structure** (foundation and load-bearing elements; very slow to change)
 - **Skin** (exterior surfaces; change about every 20 years)
 - **Services** (“working guts” – wiring, plumbing, HVAC, elevators; these can change every 7-15 years as they wear out or become obsolete)
 - **Space plan** (interior layout of walls, ceilings, floors, doors; may change as rapidly as every 3 years or may stay the same for 30 years)
 - **Stuff** (furniture, pictures, appliances and all other physical objects in a building; may change daily or monthly, according to the needs and whims of the occupants)
- Buildings that are over-specified to their purpose are difficult to change and may be uncomfortable for the inhabitants from the beginning. The people who occupy a building want to design their own spaces and put in their own stuff.
- When many people have an opportunity to contribute to decisions about a building's structure,

skin, services, space plan and stuff, the building “learns” to adapt to their needs.

In listening to Brand's remarks, and later, in reading his book, I could not help but be struck by the relationship of these principles not only to information architecture, but also to the design of successful professional societies.

ASIST has been under almost constant criticism for the past 20 years, by its friends and foes alike, for failing to grow in size, even though most scientific societies have shrunk during the same period. An examination of the phenomenon of the “incredible shrinking society” is warranted at another time, but I would like to underscore here just how successful ASIST has been, because it was designed to be flexible and its members have adapted it continuously to suit their needs.

What are the six layers of ASIST?

- **Site.** From the beginning, ASIST has been “sited” in the United States, but has been open to members from everywhere in the world. This combination of site within a particular country with receptivity to international members (about one-seventh of ASIST members are from outside the United States) has ensured continuity and stability, as well as provided protection against insularity. The Society's “site” can also be expressed in its mission and vision – which are broad enough to embrace all information professionals and their goals, while still staying close to the daily lives of ASIST members.
- **Structure.** ASIST was built with fundamental “load-bearing” elements – publications, conferences, individual memberships – that provide both operating income and vital member services.
- **Skin.** The troublesome thing about ASIST is how differently it appears to different individuals. Some view it as a gathering of scientific researchers for sharing and validating their work. Others see it as a microcosm of the “information industry,” where people from government, academia and business gather to exchange ideas and stimulate new information policies, products and services. Others see it mainly as a group of librarians who want to be informed about latest IT developments. And so on. The recent change in our name to add “and Technology” was a good effort to buff the skin, but much more needs to be done to clarify our images.
- **Services.** The “working guts” of ASIST are the membership records, website, listservs, head-

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From the Editor's Desktop



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In this issue we focus on the interaction between information technology/professional practice and its social environment, a territory that includes the most important issues facing our profession. In the first of a two-part article, Lee Strickland examines how recent legal and policy developments impact records and information management. I'm sure that we have all been struck by the prominent role that records issues have played in several recent highly publicized prosecutions, such as those related to the Enron scandal. Lee's overview of this changing climate is timely and should be required reading for all of us.

Taking the opposite perspective, Subbiah Arunachalam looks at the impact of information technology and practice on social infrastructure – in this case the impact of the Internet on the ability of scientists in developing countries to participate

in the broader scientific community. He examines the Internet's immediate negative impact, but also reviews positive steps to mitigate it. This remediation centers on the revolution in scientific and technical publishing, which is surely one of the most interesting and profound collateral effects of electronic communication.

The impact of technology on social issues is also the subject of Julian Warner's International Column as he looks at the question of limits to free speech in "Shouting Fire on a Crowded Internet." Should or can legal precedent from the paper environment be applied to the Internet, and how does its global aspect affect the legal issues?

Finally, turning to ASIST activities Andrew Dillon reports on the IA Summit, while Trudi Hahn, in her President's Page, reflects on some of its lessons for the development of ASIST.

President's Page

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quarters infrastructure and staff, and computer systems that store and run all the activities associated with publications, conferences and membership.

- **Space plan.** The internal walls of ASIST are the SIGs and chapters. These are often and easily shifted around, expanded and contracted, torn down and built fresh. The fact that ASIST is fragmented into so many SIGs and chapters ensures the involvement of a large portion of the membership and a healthy amount of diversity, which allows us to respond rapidly to changes in the external environment.

- **Stuff.** These are the ever-changing ASIST events and activities – summits on focused topics, chapter meetings, educational programs, career development events, discussion threads on listservs, awards and recognitions for outstanding accomplishments, voting on standards, conference presentations, *ARIST*, *JASIST* and *Bulletin* articles, books and proceedings.

Brand believes that buildings whose initial design allows for learning and adaptation to the needs and preferences of the current inhabitants will be more appreciated and valuable and last longer than those that do not. The size of ASIST may expand and shrink over the years, but as long as the site is stable, the structure and services remain sound or are updated as needed, and members are allowed to control the space plan and stuff, then ASIST will endure because it was designed to accommodate changes. The one area where we need work is "skin" – how members and potential members see us. As long as the image of ASIST is unrepresentative of all its other elements, we will have a tough time attracting and retaining members.

How can we preserve this building called "ASIST"? Please let me hear your ideas for strengthening the site, structure and services, polishing the skin and adapting the space plan and the stuff.